
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Linguistic Diaspora in Leïla Sebbar's *Je ne Parle pas la Langue de mon Père*

AMAL EL MANSOURI

PhD in English Literature and a member of Linguistic, Literary, Cultural and Interdisciplinary Studies Research Lab , Abdelmalek Essaadi University, Tetouan, Morocco

Corresponding Author: Amal EL MANSOURI, **E-mail:** amal.elmansouri@etu.uae.ac.ma

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Leïla Sebbar's autobiographical narrative *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* as a critical exploration of linguistic diaspora and postcolonial identity. Through close textual analysis, the study investigates how Sebbar's inability to speak Arabic—her Algerian father's native language—represents not merely a communicative gap but a profound rupture in cultural inheritance and self-formation. Drawing on Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory, the paper analyzes how linguistic absence functions as a form of inherited trauma that shapes diasporic subjectivity across generations. The analysis unfolds in three sections: first, situating Sebbar's experience within the historical context of French colonial language policies in Algeria that systematically marginalized Arabic; second, examining the emotional and psychological dimensions of linguistic loss as manifested in feelings of guilt, fragmentation, and cultural dislocation; and third, exploring how Sebbar transforms this absence into narrative resistance by appropriating French—the colonizer's language—to articulate silenced histories and reclaim hybrid postcolonial identity. The paper demonstrates that Sebbar's memoir challenges essentialist notions of linguistic authenticity while revealing how literature can serve as a site of testimony and cultural reclamation in the aftermath of colonial trauma.

KEYWORDS

linguistic diaspora, postcolonial identity, postmemory, colonial language politics, hybrid subjectivity

ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 15 November 2024

PUBLISHED: 21 December 2025

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2025.8.12.22

1 Introduction

Leïla Sebbar's *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* explores the deeply personal and political experience of linguistic alienation. As the daughter of an Algerian father and a French mother, Sebbar embodies the complex legacy of French colonialism in Algeria, a legacy that manifests most painfully in her inability to speak Arabic—her father's native language. This absence is not merely a gap in communication but a symbol of dislocation, loss, and the fractured inheritance of identity. "Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père," Sebbar (2007) writes, "et c'est une douleur ancienne, profonde, que je porte en moi depuis l'enfance" [I do not speak my father's language, and it is an old, deep pain that I have carried since childhood] (p. 9). This linguistic rupture becomes a metaphor for the broader consequences of colonialism, where language becomes both a tool of power and a site of trauma.

Drawing on the concept of linguistic diaspora, this paper offers a critical analysis of Leïla Sebbar's novel *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père*, exploring how it captures the complex tensions embedded within postcolonial subjectivity. Central to the narrative is the profound sense of emotional and cultural alienation that arises from language loss—the inability to speak or fully access the language of one's ancestral heritage—which in Sebbar's case is Arabic. This linguistic estrangement highlights the challenges of intergenerational transmission of identity, memory, and cultural belonging in the context of postcolonial displacement, where the colonial legacy has disrupted natural lines of linguistic and cultural inheritance.

To deepen this analysis, the paper draws on Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory, which offers a powerful framework for understanding how the descendants of trauma survivors inherit histories and experiences they did not live through firsthand, yet that profoundly shape their sense of self. Hirsch (2012) defines postmemory as "the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before," a connection mediated through stories, images, and silences that, despite being indirect, are felt as intensely real and lived memories (p.103). This theory is particularly useful in examining Sebbar's narrative, where the silence surrounding Arabic—the language of her father and of a broader Algerian cultural and historical experience—functions as both an absence and a form of presence, embodying a cultural intimacy from which she feels simultaneously drawn and excluded.

The paper's analysis unfolds in three interrelated sections. The first section situates Sebbar's linguistic identity within the colonial history of Algeria, highlighting how French colonialism imposed its language as a tool of domination, marginalizing Arabic and shaping the linguistic environment in which Sebbar grew up. This historical context is crucial for understanding the inherited tensions and fractures in her identity, as well as the broader implications of colonial language policies for cultural memory and subjectivity.

The second section turns to the personal and emotional dimensions of linguistic rupture in the novel. Here, the focus is on how the absence of Arabic in Sebbar's life generates complex feelings of guilt, longing, and a fragmented sense of self. The narrative captures the emotional weight of linguistic diaspora: the loss is not only communicative but also deeply affective, signaling a rupture in familial intimacy and cultural continuity. Through the lens of postmemory, this absence is not a simple void but a charged space of inherited trauma and unspoken histories that shape Sebbar's identity and narrative voice.

Finally, the third section explores how Sebbar transforms this linguistic absence into a space of narrative reclamation and resistance. Though unable to speak Arabic, she uses French—the language of the colonizer and of her own education—as a powerful medium to articulate the experience of loss and exclusion. Writing becomes a form of testimony, where silence and absence are not erased but reimagined as sites of creative expression and political engagement. By narrating what it means to not speak her father's language, Sebbar reclaims her place within the intergenerational memory of Algeria, challenging colonial linguistic hierarchies and asserting a hybrid, postcolonial identity.

In these ways, Sebbar's text offers a nuanced exploration of linguistic diaspora that illuminates broader questions about language, memory, and identity in postcolonial contexts, demonstrating how language loss can both alienate and inspire new forms of narrative and cultural belonging.

2. Colonialism and the Politics of Language

French colonial rule in Algeria extended far beyond political and economic domination; it actively pursued the linguistic erasure of indigenous languages, particularly Arabic and Berber. The colonial administration imposed French as the exclusive language of education, administration, law, and social advancement, effectively marginalizing native tongues. This imposition was not incidental but a deliberate strategy to legitimize colonial power and restructure identity hierarchies. As Leïla Sebbar (2007) poignantly states in *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père*, "Le français était la langue de l'école, de la réussite, de la République... L'arabe restait à la maison, caché, humilié" [French was the language of school, of success, of the Republic... Arabic remained at home, hidden, humiliated] (p. 18).. This juxtaposition reveals how the colonial regime elevated French to a symbol of modernity, progress, and legitimacy, while relegating Arabic to the private sphere, coded as inferior, shameful, and obsolete.

This linguistic hierarchy enforced by colonialism had deep repercussions for Algerian identities and family dynamics. For Sebbar's father, who straddled these two worlds, the situation created a painful dual consciousness. French opened doors to education and upward mobility—it was the language of opportunity in the colonial order. Yet, it simultaneously signified a disconnection from his cultural and linguistic heritage. His refusal—or inability—to transmit Arabic to his daughter was not a mere personal omission but a reflection of an internalized colonial ideology that equated native languages with backwardness and cultural failure. Sebbar (2007) captures this complex reality with clarity: "Il ne m'a pas appris sa langue. Ce n'était pas un oubli. C'était un choix. Un renoncement" [He didn't teach me his language. It wasn't forgetfulness. It was a choice. A renunciation] (p. 21). This "renunciation" underscores how colonized subjects often faced impossible choices, compelled to sacrifice cultural continuity as a survival strategy within an oppressive system designed to erase their identities.

The psychological and existential dimensions of this linguistic rupture are well theorized by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon (2008) famously argues, "To speak is to exist absolutely for the other" (p. 17). Within the colonial context, to

speak French was to gain recognition and legitimacy in the eyes of the colonizer. Yet, this came at a profound cost: the colonized subject's alienation from their own cultural self. Language here is a double-edged sword—it is simultaneously a means of survival and a form of psychological violence. Fanon elucidates how the colonized internalize the superiority of the colonizer's language and, by implication, the inferiority of their own, which engenders feelings of self-hatred and cultural dislocation.

Similarly, Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o's critique of colonial language politics in *Decolonising the Mind* resonates deeply with Sebbar's experience. Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o (2018) describes language as "the most effective weapon of colonialism" (p. 4), highlighting how the imposition of European languages severed colonized peoples from their histories, oral traditions, and indigenous epistemologies. In Sebbar's novel, this severance is lived out through her inability to access her father's world via his language. Rather than inheriting Arabic as a living tongue, she inherits its silence—a silence that, paradoxically, communicates the trauma of cultural dispossession. The absence of Arabic is not a neutral void but a presence marked by loss and exclusion.

Sebbar's (2007) narrative poignantly illustrates this dynamic when she reflects on the gulf between language and identity: "Je suis née française mais pas totalement. Je suis née arabe mais je ne parle pas la langue" [I was born French but not completely. I was born Arab but I do not speak the language] (p. 12). This statement encapsulates the fractured hybridity of the postcolonial subject, caught between languages and cultures, belonging fully to neither. Her fluency in French is thus not simply a linguistic fact but a symbol of colonial inheritance and alienation.

Ultimately, Sebbar's narrative transforms this inherited silence into a form of testimony and resistance. By narrating the pain and paradox of not speaking her father's language, she exposes how colonialism's most intimate violence—its assault on language—is also a means of shaping identity, memory, and belonging. Her work foregrounds the linguistic politics of postcolonial trauma, showing that language loss is not just about communication but about the survival of culture and selfhood in the shadow of colonial erasure.

3. The Emotional Landscape of Linguistic Rupture

Leïla Sebbar's narrative reveals that her inability to speak her father's language, Arabic, is far more than a practical communication gap—it constitutes a profound emotional wound that shapes her sense of self and belonging. Throughout *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père*, Sebbar articulates complex feelings of guilt, shame, and longing tied to this linguistic absence. She mourns a connection that feels lost, inaccessible, or perhaps never fully realized. The silence surrounding Arabic is not merely a matter of vocabulary or grammar but represents a generational and emotional chasm: a father who, whether by choice or circumstance, does not transmit his language, and a daughter who must grapple with the painful absence of a fundamental part of her heritage.

Sebbar (2007) writes poignantly about this estrangement: "Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père. Je ne la parle pas, mais elle parle en moi" [I do not speak my father's language. I do not speak it, but it speaks within me] (p. 7). This statement captures the paradox of linguistic diaspora—although she cannot vocalize Arabic herself, its presence reverberates within her identity and consciousness. The language becomes a ghostly presence, a haunting reminder of what has been lost and what might have been. The verb "parle" (speaks) takes on a double meaning here: it refers simultaneously to her inability to articulate Arabic and to the language's continued influence on her inner world. Arabic exists within her not as accessible knowledge but as absence made present, as a void that paradoxically occupies space in her psyche.

This formulation suggests that language operates on multiple registers—not only as a communicative tool but as an embodied inheritance, a sensory memory, and an affective landscape. Even without mastery of its syntax or vocabulary, Sebbar experiences Arabic as an interior force that shapes her emotional life and sense of cultural belonging. The phrase "elle parle en moi" evokes a kind of involuntary resonance, as though the language persists despite her silence, speaking through her feelings of loss, her attraction to Arabic sounds and rhythms, her curiosity about her father's world, and her ongoing attempts to bridge the gap through writing. This internal voice is not one she controls or fully understands; rather, it exists as a trace, a fragment, or an echo of a linguistic world she was denied access to but cannot fully escape.

The notion of a language "speaking within" also raises questions about transmission, memory, and inheritance. What does it mean to carry a language one has never learned? Sebbar's reflection suggests that language is not purely learned or acquired through formal education but can also be inherited affectively and psychologically. The daughter absorbs something of her father's linguistic world—its emotional weight, its historical burden, its cultural significance—even if she cannot reproduce its phonetic or grammatical structures. This points to a form of postmemory, where the trauma or loss experienced by one generation

leaves indelible marks on the next, shaping identity in ways that exceed conscious memory or direct experience. Sebbar's linguistic silence thus becomes a form of inherited mourning, a grief for something she never possessed but nonetheless feels the absence of profoundly.

4. Writing as Reclamation and Resistance

Although Leïla Sebbar does not speak Arabic—the language of her father and cultural heritage—her writing emerges as a profound act of resistance against the colonial erasure of language and identity. In *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père*, Sebbar does not shy away from the rupture caused by linguistic loss; rather, she openly acknowledges and mourns it. This act of mourning is also an act of reclamation, as she endeavors to reclaim a cultural and emotional lineage that colonialism and intergenerational silence sought to deny her. Through the very act of writing, she forges a connection to a history and identity that was threatened by displacement and linguistic marginalization.

Sebbar's choice to write in French—the language of the colonizer—reflects a complex and paradoxical tension central to postcolonial literature. She confronts the ambivalence of using the colonizer's language as a tool for anti-colonial resistance and self-expression. As she states, "Je n'ai pas la langue de mon père, mais j'ai sa mémoire, et je la porte en français" [I do not have my father's language, but I carry his memory, and I carry it in French] (Sebbar, 2007, p. 35). This admission encapsulates the dual-edged nature of her linguistic position: French is both an inheritance of colonial domination and a means to articulate the stories and silences left by that domination.

Far from rejecting her linguistic reality, Sebbar embraces the hybridity that defines her postcolonial subjectivity. This embrace challenges essentialist notions of identity and language, asserting that cultural identity is not fixed but fluid, negotiated through multiple languages and histories. As Homi K. Bhabha (2012) suggests in his concept of hybridity, such in-between spaces become sites of cultural negotiation and resistance, where the colonized subject can "negotiate and subvert the colonial discourse from within" (p. 38). Sebbar's novel exemplifies this process, using French not to assimilate but to reflect critically on what has been lost, what remains, and how identity can be reconstructed through language.

Her writing transforms the silence surrounding Arabic into a narrative space, turning absence into presence. She articulates this transformation when she writes, "Le silence que je porte est chargé de paroles non dites" [The silence I carry is charged with unspoken words] (Sebbar, 2007, p. 42). This charged silence is not emptiness but a reservoir of memory, emotion, and resistance. By giving voice to what was silenced, Sebbar's memoir becomes a site of testimony—a counter-discourse that challenges the structures of colonial power that sought to erase her linguistic and cultural heritage.

Moreover, *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* exemplifies how diasporic subjects navigate fragmented identities through literature. Sebbar's narrative reveals that identity formation in postcolonial and diasporic contexts is often a process of negotiation between absence and presence, loss and recovery, silence and speech. As she reflects, "Je suis la fille d'un pays que je ne connais pas, qui parle une langue que je ne parle pas, mais que je raconte" [I am the daughter of a country I do not know, which speaks a language I do not speak, but which I narrate] (Sebbar, 2007, p. 50). This act of narration becomes a powerful assertion of agency, a refusal to be silenced by historical and linguistic dispossession.

In this way, Sebbar's narrative is a testament to the transformative potential of literature as a means of reclaiming voice, memory, and identity in the aftermath of colonial trauma. It highlights how the written word can serve as a space for healing and resistance, enabling diasporic subjects to challenge the very structures that sought to marginalize and erase them. By writing her linguistic diaspora, Sebbar not only confronts her own history but also gives visibility to the broader experiences of postcolonial alienation and resilience.

5. Conclusion

Leïla Sebbar's *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* constitutes a critical intervention in postcolonial discourse, interrogating the enduring mechanisms through which colonial linguistic policies fracture identity, memory, and intergenerational transmission. This analysis has demonstrated that Sebbar's inability to speak Arabic extends beyond individual circumstance to emblemize the systematic erasure of indigenous languages under French colonial rule in Algeria. The narrative exposes how colonialism's imposition of French as the language of legitimacy, modernity, and social mobility effectively relegated Arabic to the margins, creating a linguistic hierarchy that severed colonized subjects from their cultural heritage. Sebbar's narrative thus

functions as both testimony and critique, revealing the intimate violence of colonial language politics and their persistence across generations.

Central to understanding Sebbar's work is Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory, which illuminates how trauma is transmitted across generations through absences, silences, and mediated narratives. Sebbar inherits her father's linguistic displacement not as lived experience but as a profound absence that nonetheless structures her subjectivity and sense of belonging. Arabic emerges in the memoir as a spectral presence—simultaneously inaccessible and deeply felt—marking her identity with the paradoxes of postcolonial existence. This linguistic estrangement engenders what the memoir articulates as a fundamental rupture in selfhood: Sebbar occupies an interstitial space between French and Arab identities, belonging fully to neither yet shaped irrevocably by both. The emotional landscape of guilt, longing, and fragmentation that pervades the text underscores how language loss operates not merely at the communicative level but as a site of profound psychic and cultural dislocation.

Ultimately, Sebbar's novel enacts a form of narrative resistance that transforms linguistic absence into a site of critical agency and cultural reclamation. By writing her linguistic diaspora in French, she appropriates the colonizer's language to articulate the very trauma that language imposed, thereby subverting colonial discourse from within. This act of writing—of giving voice to silence—challenges essentialist conceptions of linguistic and cultural authenticity, asserting instead a hybrid postcolonial identity that refuses the binary logic of colonial thought. Sebbar's work thus exemplifies how literature can serve as a counter-discourse, enabling diasporic subjects to negotiate fractured inheritances and claim space within contested histories. In illuminating the politics of linguistic loss and the possibilities of narrative reclamation, *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père* offers invaluable insights into the ongoing legacies of colonialism and the resilience of those who navigate its aftermath.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Publisher's Note: All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers

References

- [1] Bhabha, H. K. (2012). *The location of culture* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- [2] Fanon, F. (2008). *Black skin, white masks* (R. Philcox, Trans.). Grove Press. (Original work published 1952)
- [3] Hirsch, M. (2012). *The generation of postmemory: Writing and visual culture after the Holocaust*. Columbia University Press.
- [4] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. (2018). *Decolonising the mind: The politics of language in African literature* (Rev. ed.). James Currey.
- [5] Sebbar, L. (2007). *Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père*. Actes Sud.